

Delving into Female Adolescents Leadership Experiences in the Midst of Leading Service Learning Engagements: A Qualitative Case Study

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The purpose of this work is to explore the experiences of four adolescent females who assumed leadership roles in service learning projects, in order to understand more about how those projects inspired and informed their understanding of themselves as leaders in the school and community. What became clear through this study is that age and gender played largely into participants' understanding of leadership. It also became evident that adolescent females need opportunities to practice their leadership skills and that service learning projects have the potential to create such occasions.

L'objectif de ce travail est d'explorer les expériences de quatre adolescentes qui ont assumé des rôles de leadership dans le contexte de projets d'apprentissage par le service, et d'en tirer des connaissances sur la mesure dans laquelle ces projets les ont inspirées et ont façonné leur identité de chef au sein de l'école et de la communauté. Les résultats indiquent que l'âge et le sexe ont joué un rôle significatif dans leur compréhension du leadership. Ils révèlent également que les adolescentes ont besoin d'occasion de pratiquer leurs compétences en leadership et que les projets d'apprentissage par le service présentent le potentiel de fournir de telles occasions.

The bulk of the literature on leadership tends to focus on adults (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; DesMaris, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; van Linden & Fertman, 1998); contrasted with a notable gap documenting the experiences and perceptions of adolescents as leaders (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007), an observation reiterated by many scholars (Ackerman & Boccia, 1997; Archard, 2013; Connor & Strobel, 2007; Des Maris, 2000; Lizzio, Dempster, & Neumann, 2010; McNae, 2010; Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005; Mullen & Tuten, 2004; Pleasants, Stephens, Selph, & Pfeiffer, 2005; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Whitehead, 2009; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). This goes against the practice in adult leadership studies where often models, styles, and approaches are learned from the group or profession being studied. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) argue that it is not possible to understand youth leadership by imposing adult models onto adolescent experiences, as adolescent leadership is unique from adult leadership. There are two widely used definitions to identify the parameters of adolescent leadership. The first pertains to how adolescents tend to lead through group consensus and the second definition focuses on personal motivation and the desire to inspire others. In short,

adolescent leadership is collaborative and, in many ways, social. The Social Policy Research Associates (2003) observed that according to youth, “leadership ... is about learning how to participate in group processes, build consensus, and subsume personal interests and ideas to those of the collective” (p. 7). Like-minded scholars, Van Linden and Fertman (1998) describe leaders, “as individuals (both adults and adolescents) who think for themselves, communicate their thoughts and feelings to others, and help others to understand and act on their own beliefs” (p. 17). In other words, leaders inspire others to act. This is echoed by Dempster and Lizzio (2007), who argue that for adolescents, relationships matter more than institutions with respect to leadership, and that they understand leadership in a way that differs from adults. Van Linden and Fertman (1998) suggest that adolescents see leadership “as a physical sensation: a need to share ideas, energy, and creativity, and not let personal insecurities be an obstacle” (p.17). It is important to note the underlying connections to identity; adolescent leadership is not about pushing identity and power onto others. Instead, scholars have noted that adolescent leaders seem to focus on creating the opportunity for others to express their ideas.

In order to better understand youth leadership, some studies have focused on the opinions of principals and teachers (Ackerman & Boccia, 1997; Mullan & Tuten, 2004). Ackerman and Boccia (1997) found that principals were ambivalent about the prevalence of student leadership in schools; in contrast Mullan and Tuten (2004) noted that “the ‘cool kids’ at school ‘are usually the leaders’” (p. 305). Whereas Whitehead (2009) found that students who were identified as leaders by adults only represented one segment of the students who were identified as leaders by their peers. Of note, the students who were “disruptive, aggressive and demonstrated poor academic performance” (Whitehead, 2009, p. 859) were also seen as leaders by their peer groups (Ackerman and Boccia, 1997), but not necessarily by adults, furthering the argument that adolescent leadership may be perceived differently by adolescents than it is by adults. At present while much has been done to define adolescent leadership, at best it remains “a fuzzy concept in the literature” (Conner and Strobel, 2007, p. 277) and little is known about how to best foster opportunities where adolescents might develop leadership skills.

Female Leadership Development: Keeping Options Open

Overall, little is known about youth leadership development amongst female adolescents (McNae, 2010); what has been documented has focused upon females in single gender settings or schools (Archard, 2013; Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005; McNae, 2010). An even smaller field of work has looked at the emergence of adolescent female leaders as situated in co-educational settings (Bailey, 1996; Orenstein, 1994; Schell & Rodriguez, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). The implications from both areas are critically important. For instance, as outlined by Archard (2013), understanding adolescent females’ views on leadership and leadership development may help to guide and prepare them for leadership roles as adults. What is also notable about the research on adolescent female leadership, and about adolescent leadership and gender more broadly, is the tendency to simplify and stereotype (Warner, Langlois, & Dumond, 2010). The tendency is to describe men as being inclined towards “competitive landscapes while females are inclined to cooperative landscapes” (Whitehead, 2009, p. 858). In the education field, leadership tends to be defined per societal norms, that is, males are more likely to be transactional leaders and females are likely to be transformative leaders (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). While there may be some elements of social truth to these claims, arguably the lack of research allows these observations to become generalizations about gender, leadership, and

adolescents. We argue that there is both a risk and disservice in simplifying the correlation between leadership, gender as well as race, culture, ethnicity, language, and class, at any age, but particularly for adolescents. The lack of established research on adolescent females as leaders suggests that this is a significant void, particularly when considering the ongoing discussions about nurturing and valuing female styles of leadership (Biklen & Brannigan, 1980; Curry, 2000; Hills, 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Young & Skria, 2003).

Service Learning as a Space for Adolescent Leadership Development

Overall, scholars tend to reinforce the merits of service learning as being a fertile context for the development of leadership (DesMaris, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000; Sims, 2010; Pleasants, Stephens, Selph, & Pfeiffer, 2005). Service learning can create spaces where young people are encouraged to act as leaders while also learning how to work collaboratively with adults who can help guide the process (DesMaris, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000). Pleasants et al. (2005) suggest service learning as an effective means for teaching leadership for two reasons, “guided reflection fosters a meaningful service experience, and it encourages students to discover their own personal style of leadership” (p. 18). Service learning is a way to expose students to leadership experiences in the community, thereby possibly inspiring civic engagement at an early age (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007).

In response to what is unknown about the intricacies of adolescent leadership, particularly female adolescents, and the possibilities of service learning to foster such development, the purpose of this study was two-fold. Firstly, the aim was to explore the experiences of four adolescent females who assumed leadership roles in service learning projects. Secondly, the intent was to understand more about how those projects informed their understanding of themselves as leaders in the school and community.

Theoretical Framework

To contextualize our positions as facilitators of service learning, the theoretical framework of this study draws upon constructivism and critical theory (Aaltio & Mills, 2002; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Blackmore, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010). The service learning projects, and the research itself, falls in the tradition of critical theory that seeks to reform or change the lives of both the participants and the researchers through engagement (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, critical theory is understood as a theoretical approach that focuses on the lived experiences of particular groups of people who may have traditionally been marginalized, highlights inequalities that arise through power relationships in the contexts of where the work is being done, and seeks to transform asymmetrical relationships in the name of social justice (Mertens, 2010). The study was also informed by the underlying assumption that there are always “multiple subjective realities” (Creswell, 1998, p.73) at play. Given that we wanted to hear the experiences and gain a better understanding of the perspectives of four adolescent females who engaged in service learning leadership roles, Heather, the first author, created spaces for adolescent females to emerge as leaders as part of a service learning engagement in ways that were not previously available to them (Creswell, 1998). We drew on critical theory as researchers as it allowed us to participate in the “conscious-raising and transformation” (Creswell, 2007) of the participants with whom we were working. By first by naming the participants as leaders and then by giving their stories a space where they were heard, we found,

the work was empowering to them. In this study, service learning acted as both a catalyst and framework for identity work and leadership to happen amongst participants (Curry, 2000; DesMaris, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000). At the same time, there is a philosophical underpinning the importance of fostering community minded, empathetic citizens inherent in the process. For example, all four participants noted that the opportunity to create meaning by matching their own sense of purpose to their project goal empowered them to become active members of their community.

Finally, the field of leadership, specifically adolescent leadership played an important role in how it informed our thinking in the design and enactment of the study. We understand that leadership considers contextual, personal, moral, and cultural elements (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Gardner, 1990; Sandberg, 2013; Whitehead, 2009) and that adolescent leadership is a strand of leadership, which includes group process, consensus building, and collaboration (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Lizzio, Dempster & Neumann, 2010; McNae, 2010; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002). Within this field, scholars identify adolescent female leadership as a gap in the literature (Archard, 2013; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Lizzio, Dempster & Neumann, 2010; McNae, 2010; Whitehead, 2007); this is in stark contact with how female leadership is often championed in the media (Biklen & Brannigan, 1980; Curry, 2000; Hills, 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Young & Skria, 2003). As researchers informed by critical theory (Aaltio & Mills, 2002; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Blackmore, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010), our intent was that this work would enable the participants to think broadly about how they understand themselves as leaders.

Methodological Considerations

Designed as a qualitative case study, the research was conducted in a suburban high school in a mid-sized city in Nova Scotia during the spring of 2014. The service learning program was the bounded system (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, Plano, & Morales, 2007; Merriam, 2009) in which the study was situated. Four grade 11 and 12 female participants, all Caucasian, from lower and upper middle class families were selected to take part in the study after they had expressed interest in leading a service learning engagement. The service learning program was open to all students in the school as an extra-curricular opportunity. Interested students were excused from school to participate in a day-long leadership workshop, co-led by Heather, and then met weekly while working on their projects. Student projects were based on their personal interests; during any given semester in this school there are between eight and ten service learning projects taking place. Project examples in the spring of 2014 included clothing drives for local youth homeless shelters, educating the school population about sustainable food cycles through local farmers, random acts of kindness as a mental health awareness project, and collaborative music and video projects. Over the course of three years, prior to the study, Heather, a former teacher in the school, had observed that females who otherwise did not assume leadership roles in the school tended to gravitate towards the leading of service learning projects.

Of central consideration to the study was how to provide opportunities for participants to articulate the meaning of their experiences over time while using multiple modes of expression to do so. For example, participants were encouraged to talk, write reflectively, and generate visual representations such as timelines about their experiences. Qualitative research allows for data to be collected in a diversity of modes, to explore the experiences of people in nuanced ways (Merriam, 2009). This essential principle informed our thinking and approach to this research;

the study was designed to include multiple modes of data to try to tap into the complexity of experiences of the participants. To that end, the design of the research was rooted in a qualitative approach, as we were interested in better understanding the experiences of adolescent females as they led service learning engagements.

Data was collected over a 7-week period in the spring of 2014 and included three interviews, field notes, and participant generated artifacts representing different phases of the service learning engagement. Specifically, all four students were interviewed at the beginning, middle, and end of their service learning engagements. This aligned with the structure of the service learning program: a) a beginning was established with a leadership day, b) a middle comprised the duration of the projects themselves, and c) an end where a showcase of the work and learning occurred. Ongoing field notes were written based upon observations of participants' experiences as they led service learning engagements. Finally, participants wrote reflections about their experiences and generated artifacts, some of which included timelines, photos and drawings. The reflections and artifacts served as discussion points during interviews. It is important to note that the generation of artifacts, and conversations about them were informed by the critical theory underpinnings of this work, creating connections between the intentions of the research and the methodology used. These conversations not only gave the participants the opportunity to share their experiences, they also gave the researchers opportunities to disrupt deficit thinking and perceptions.

Data analysis was ongoing and emergent (Merriam, 2009). This process involved identifying patterns in an ongoing manner and cross-referencing these across the data sets (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to inform the development of overall themes. Inductive analysis enabled us to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts. For example, participants' references to leadership methodologically enabled us to pinpoint their positioning in different contexts with others. Once we had ascertained commonalities we then located connections amongst leadership, perceived responsibilities, and relationships in relation to the service learning engagements. Ongoing analysis of participants' accounts encouraged us to represent participants' leadership experiences as found poetry, as the data required representation in a form that facilitated understanding and captured participants' authentic experiences using language and form (Cahnmann, 2003), particularly in how participants' understanding of their own leadership emerged over time as instances of profound learning (Mitton-Kükner, 2013, 2015).

Findings: Participants' Perspectives on Age, Gender, and Outworking Leadership Stereotypes

Throughout the study participants were asked to consider the philosophy and action of leadership, and prior to conducting the interviews, we expected that participants would talk about their own service learning projects in terms of teamwork and the challenges they faced as part of the process. While these concerns were mentioned, all of the participants seemed to be more interested in discussing and reflecting on how their approach to leadership was impacted by their age and gender. Three interconnected ideas emerged as part of our analysis. Firstly, each young woman identified age as an important factor in how she was perceived as a leader. Secondly, each participant discussed gender differences and their experiences as females in leadership roles. And finally, all four participants noted that being an adolescent female leader meant they had to outwork societal expectations that stereotyped their abilities as leaders. In

what follows, excerpts of found poems are used to represent each theme. The larger data set associated with this work includes sixteen poems. Three poems, each about a different participant, have been selected to represent each of the themes and represent sentiments that were shared by all four participants. The excerpts chosen reflect recurring patterns that we saw across participants' accounts of their experiences as they engaged in conversation about the process of becoming leaders in the midst of leading a service learning engagement.

Theme One: Participants' Ideas about Female Adolescent Leadership

Foundational to the theoretical framework that shaped the design of the study is the exploration of leadership from the perspective of adolescent females. As suggested by many scholars, there is a need to hear from adolescents and adolescent females to better understand their beliefs about the philosophy and action of leadership (Archard, 2013; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Lizzio, Dempster, & Neumann, 2010; McNae, 2010; Whitehead, 2007). In interviews, participants were asked to talk about their beliefs and actions as related to female adolescent leadership and to relate these thoughts to their experiences in their service learning projects. The poem selected for discussion was created using a found poetry methodology by Heather, using the transcripts from Katherine. Here, Katherine explores her ideas about societal expectations and her motivation to take action in response to what she observed around her. Katherine was fairly new to service learning and saw it as an opportunity to build on her confidence and develop her leadership skills.

Katherine.

You hear 'adolescent' and it's, you know,
"hood rat"
"trouble"
"drugs"
"thugs"
all those images of what a typical teenager should be.
Then you throw in the word "female"
and "leader"
and the reaction you get to that string of words,
"oh well that's cute".

When women decide to take on very big projects with a lot of responsibility
they are viewed as not being able to handle it in some circumstances.
It makes me just kind of light a fire, you know?

I've always been the person who when I'm told I can't do something I want to do that.
Stuck so low in expectation
I believe it means being an adolescent female leader
is to do the absolute best job possible
to obliterate expectation.

I hope this project will mold me into an adult who won't just stand by
let things happen.
I will not be just a bystander when things go to the wayside.

Discussing Katherine. What comes through in Katherine's poem is her strong sense of determination to overcome, what she described, as a societal "expectation" of adolescents and females to be less capable in leadership roles than adults and males. Katherine noted a difference between being a teenager and being a female. The first stanza of the poem is not gender specific, but does address her view of the perceptions that she felt existed for teenagers. She referenced the terms "hood rat," "trouble," "drugs," and "thugs" as being what she believed is a common understanding of how teenagers are perceived. She also discussed her views on how women are viewed in society as being less-than-able when taking on the leadership of a large project: "When women decide to take on very big projects with a lot of responsibility, they are viewed as not being able to handle it in some circumstances." During our conversations, she was very matter-of-fact about these perceptions of adolescents and females, suggesting that it was something that she often observed, an accepted power imbalance in the world around her. She noted that the combination of being an adolescent and an aspiring female leader was often judged patronizingly, evident in her comment, "oh well that's cute." Over the course of the research, through conversations and her own work, this articulated observation seemed to serve as both a realization and motivation for her to take action to disrupt societal expectations. This came to light through her conversations with Heather, suggesting that the insight happened in part because she had a trusted adult to support her.

Of the participants, Katherine was very direct in her comment on the need for adolescent female leaders "to do the absolute best job possible/to obliterate expectation." Katherine seemed to think that women must work harder as a way to outperform societal stereotypes. Katherine became comfortable talking about the issues of age and gender but was more tentative in her discussion about turning belief into action: "I hope this project will mold me into an adult who won't just stand by, let things happen." As Katherine was new to service learning leadership at the time of the study, it seemed she could see the potential of this project in developing her skills and confidence.

Theme Two: Evolving Understandings of Adolescent Leadership, from Theory to Practice

Emerging from conversations with participants, were three recurring ideas about their evolving understanding of leadership. Firstly, consistent with the literature that suggests that females are drawn to cooperative rather than competitive settings (Whitehead, 2009), all four participants articulated the importance of leadership as being a shared, collaborative, inclusive experience that should involve the input of all group members. This seemed to be the basis of their understandings and underpinned how they acted and perceived their roles in their groups. Secondly, the participants found it hard to define themselves as leaders, although they could describe approaches to leadership that they were comfortable using in appropriate situations. Finally, as the study progressed and their service learning work unfolded, all four participants noted the importance of someone, usually themselves, stepping up to ensure the success of the group's collaboration. As group leaders, the participants were not necessarily comfortable standing out from the group, and they seemed to want to work collaboratively as much as possible. However, as the projects unfolded, participants also recognized the importance of being what Siobhan called a "defined leader" (Siobhan, personal communication, May 2014) in terms of behavior and actions in their group and in how they were perceived by group members.

The poem selected to illustrate this theme is from Ella. Ella had the most experience of the participants in service learning leadership, but when we talked, she found it difficult to define herself as a leader. Like the other participants, she valued the collaborative contributions of all group members and felt that her role was to bring everyone's ideas together. She was comfortable standing out from the group to do this, and recognized that she possessed leadership skills, but struggled with owning the title of *leader*. However, in spite of that, she was very confident in her ability to create and facilitate community projects now and in the future.

Ella.

Leadership has always been a contradictory thing to me
If left alone I will take on a lot of responsibility
But I don't want to cross the line of being a leader and being a dictator.
It's always kind of difficult to think of yourself as a leader.

I've seen TED Talks and videos and people talking about leadership.
There's this sort of level of unattainability put on a label of leader.
That they're absolute.
That they always have the answers.
That they're the go-to.

In the process of leadership, and thinking about myself as a leader, I know that I have to go to a lot of
different people who know more in their respective areas than I do.

There's always going to be people who are more vocal than others.
Who want to be the decision makers.
Take on responsibility.

There are other people in the group who contribute by pointing out flaws and weaknesses of the
group, as well as strengths.

I think I'm somebody who likes to approach challenges and take a lead on them
But as far as identifying myself as a community and school leader it's always difficult for me to accept
the title.

I don't feel that I'm of this unattainable status or that I have all the answers.
I just happen to be the one that likes to put things together.

I've been learning to take on different roles of leadership.
One group I was in, I did not lead, but I learned a lot from that:
silent contribution and the vocal contribution.
Now, I'm thinking it is more of a collective ideal.
That everybody contributes something.
Makes the project work.
I think that's what leadership is,
the ability to let everybody have an input that comes together.

(Ella, Found poem based upon personal communication, April-May, 2014)

Discussing Ella. Ella's involvement in a number of service learning projects in which she held different roles gave her many experiences to draw upon as we talked about leadership.

Because she not only had experience with different roles, and had observed others making a variety of contributions, she seemed to understand that leadership can take on many forms, for example: “There’s always going to be people who are more vocal than others. Who want to be the decision makers.” She contrasted the decision makers with other group members who contribute by “pointing out flaws and weaknesses of the group, as well as strengths.” Ella never saw herself as being vocal, but she knew she could be responsible and a decision maker. She perceived her role as one in which she was to collect input from people in the group, regardless of their approach to the project. To that end, collaboration was central to her leadership approach. Throughout her experiences, she was able to explore her particular contribution and style: “One group I was in, I did not lead, but I learned a lot from that: silent contribution and the vocal contribution.” Having different roles in each group helped her to refine her style as a leader. In the literature, scholars note males are most likely to be transactional leaders and females are more likely to be transformative leaders (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008); Ella did not want to take on a transactional stance, but did realize that there was a need to take on a position of power in particular contexts. When talking about being a leader, she said: “Now, I’m thinking it is more of a collective ideal. That everybody contributes something.” This important shift in her thinking about leadership allowed her to come to the conclusion that, for her, leadership is “the ability to let everybody have an input that comes together.” In her delivery of this analysis, Ella seemed content with having come to that conclusion, and personal understanding of her role as a current and future leader of her peers and members of the community. For Ella, her role was to analyze the contributions of each group member, consider the goals of the project, and come up with a way to synthesize and connect all of these things together. She appeared to derive satisfaction in using this leadership approach and seemed to have a confidence as a result of this self-realization.

Ella recognized that she liked being a leader, enjoyed assuming responsibility, and framed this by saying: “I don’t feel that I’m of this unattainable status or that I have all the answers. I just happen to be the one that likes to put things together.” Ella was comfortable using the language of leadership and discussing her leadership skills but did not want to take on the title of leader. By the end of her service learning engagements, Ella was confident in her skills as a leader, and embraced her ability to bring ideas together. She was comfortable standing out from her group to facilitate this process, but never departed from her belief that leadership is collaborative. In many ways, she seemed to find a way to reconcile both approaches in a way that was authentic to her.

As noted, like the other participants, Ella struggled with assuming the title leader: “I’ve seen TED Talks and videos and people talking about leadership. There’s this sort of level of unattainability put on a label of leader.” This, we suggest, is significant not only to Ella but to all of the participants. The role models of leadership who participants drew upon as examples were confident adults. Even though these four participants, and many of their peers could be role models, their singular definition of leadership seemed to be limiting their ability to see themselves and their peers as leaders.

Theme Three: Service Learning as a Space for Leadership

The third theme explores how the participants viewed the service learning projects and their impact upon the development of leadership skills. In their responses, participants oscillated between talking about personal growth and their own confidence, and talking about practical

skills with respect to operationalizing service learning projects. Overall, three ideas emerged. First, each participant was able to identify personal skills and talents that she had not previously acknowledged in herself. Second, participants acknowledge the practical skills that were needed in order to lead a project. Finally, participants recognized how what they learned may apply to future leadership pursuits in a variety of possible contexts such as service learning, school and careers. Regardless of the actual success of the service learning engagement, all participants felt that the skills and confidence they developed were useful and that made the pursuit worthwhile. The found poem representative of this theme comes from Jane. Jane began this process thinking that she could not be a leader, but was able to identify a number of skills that she felt had developed in response to leading a service learning engagement.

Jane.

In smaller challenges and smaller projects like service learning
it gives you a chance to be a leader.
In a smaller more secure setting while you can still make mistakes,
it gives you a chance to learn.

I've learned how to be a leader.
How to take action.
Even though I learned from mistakes,
in the future, I would be, I think, more forward.
You can't expect things to be perfect right off the bat.
You think about what you want to accomplish.
What other people want to accomplish.
How they fit together.
How other people feel.
Listen.
Make a plan.
Take action.
You can plan all you want.
Take control.
Do things.
You have to be able to call people.

I think it's worth noting that even when project is slow in the start,
even if things are slow to get going,
and you're not really sure what you're doing,
it can take time to figure that out.
But once you figure that out everything becomes so much easier.
You're able to actually accomplish goal that you didn't think you'd get to.

Advice?
I would say...
Have an open mind about what the outcome could be.
You can start off with an idea in your head about what you want to happen.
You can picture it.
But plans are meant to be changed.

Not everything's set in stone.
What you originally planned might not happen and that's not a failure.
You can keep going and have something else happen.
I think that's important.

I think I have more confidence now than before,
to be able to do things on my own
and be able to take charge.
Before I was definitely more shy.
I didn't have the confidence.
Now, This experience has given me the confidence to present myself in the world,
to undertake challenges.

(Jane, Found poem based upon personal communication, April-May, 2014)

Discussing Jane. Jane came into the service learning engagement unsure about how to be a leader, as she felt that she needed to have all of the answers and a set plan in order to fulfill that role. Jane came to realize that service learning and leadership are processes that unfold over time. Her group was trying to set up an opportunity to play music in a nursing home and, early on, they realized that the project was not going to unfold as they expected. Through this, she began to realize that projects do not always happen as planned. Leadership, she realized, is as much about responding to unpredictable circumstances, as it is about following a plan. This was a significant realization for Jane who, in many aspects of her life, was used to following a prescribed plan. Jane was a very strong student who, based on classroom observations, and on her description of herself, always did what was asked of her. As a result, she was successful in that realm. Improvising within a framework, rather than following a prescribed plan was a new experience for her. Once Jane came to realize that the leader does not need to have every answer or every step planned, she became much more comfortable in her role as leader. In other words, through practice, she realized that she did not always have to follow directions or expectations; she could herself take the lead into unknown situations.

This ability to improvise allowed Jane to develop and identify leadership skills. She said, "I've learned how to be a leader. How to take action." This was an important lesson for her. She further articulated her understanding of the process by saying, "You can't expect things to be perfect right off the bat. You think about what you want to accomplish. What other people want to accomplish How they fit together." For Jane, letting go of having a predictable outcome allowed her to realize that she did not need all of the answers; she instead needed to be confident that she could find them. She saw this as an important realization.

Jane was also able to identify particular practical skills that she developed throughout the project that would help her going forward in other engagements. "Listen. Make a plan. Take action. You can plan all you want. Take control. Do things. You have to be able to call people." At the beginning of the service learning engagement, Jane saw these skills as being out of reach for her. However, by the end of the project, she had a different view of her own abilities: "I think I have more confidence now than before, to be able to do things on my own and be able to take charge." This confidence did not come as a result of one event; instead, as the engagement unfolded, she continued to try small tasks that, together, enabled her to realize that she possessed a leadership skill set. Like the other participants, once Jane could identify some of these skills, she could see herself as more of a leader. The service learning process allowed her to

develop these skills: “In smaller challenges and smaller projects like service learning, it gives you a chance to be a leader. In a smaller more secure setting while you can still make mistakes, it gives you a chance to learn.” For Jane, and the other participants, having a safe environment to explore leadership that included having adults and other adolescent leaders doing similar projects to talk to, as the process unfolded, was central to her willingness to take risks and learn about leadership. Jane’s initial experience with service learning was positive, and gave her the skills to approach future service learning projects with more confidence.

Together, the development of personal and practical skills allowed Jane to think of herself as a leader. As she said, “I think I have more confidence now than before, to be able to do things on my own and be able to take charge”. When she began the project, she was unsure about associating herself with leadership. By the end, she said, “I’ve learned how to be a leader.” She was excited about the possibility of what she could do going forward and was looking forward to applying these skills to a service learning project in the following school year.

Discussion: Social Constraints, Time, and Relationships Shaping Female Participants’ Understanding of Leadership

According to the participants, adolescent leadership is different than adult leadership, particularly in the ways age and gender strongly informed how they perceived themselves as leaders. It was also evident that they had determined that the way to change these expectations was to outwork stereotypes regarding female leadership, particularly the notions that associated leadership with adult perspectives (Whitehead, 2009). Gender was identified by all of the participants as being an equally important factor in considering leadership. Katherine made reference to negative societal stereotypes about women as leaders, commenting on how these expectations were unfair and unfounded. In a conversation with Ella, she took this discussion further, both using the word “bitchy” to describe how female leaders are generally perceived connecting to personal experiences, and also by being called pet names by adults who she was trying to work with. It was clear that Ella and Katherine were angered by these stereotypes and by their own experiences of being treated unfairly. In the literature scholars suggest that males are inclined towards competitive settings and transactional leadership while females are drawn to cooperative settings and transformative leadership (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008; Whitehead, 2009). While this is a generalization that is consistent with the participants’ accounts, it is also evident from Ella and Katherine’s comments that they felt as though they were met with resistance when they did try to be assertive, and how all of the participants struggled to stand out or be decisive when pure collaboration was not working. A final observation that is worth noting is that all participants felt that they were able achieve their goals because of their ability to outwork negative societal stereotypes and expectations about female leaders. While participants seemed to be empowered by taking on this role, it is also worth considering the energy that is required to outwork expectations while taking on a leadership role and is something in need of further exploration.

Evolving Understandings of Adolescent Leadership.

Over the course of the study as participants led service learning projects, their understanding of leadership evolved. By the end of the study, each of the four participants felt that leadership should be a shared, collaborative, inclusive experience. There was a deep belief held by all four

participants that all members of a group had a valuable contribution to make and that a leader's role was to facilitate the inclusion of these ideas. What became clear over time was that each participant struggled with figuring out how to facilitate the kind of leadership needed to elicit these collective contributions without changing the dynamics of the group.

Part of the challenge that each participant faced in determining her leadership style was establishing a definition of what it meant to be a leader. There seemed to be a sense that being a leader meant being "the boss." Jane framed this as being the "head person" (Jane, personal communication, May, 2014) while Siobhan used the terms "integrated" and "defined" as a way to identify kinds of leadership (Siobhan, personal communication, April, 2014). Early in the study, these understandings of leader did not align with who the participants felt they were as people; they saw it as being transactional, a leadership style often tied to males (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). Over time, all four of the participants were able to attach themselves to a more collaborative definition of leadership that aligned with their own identities and belief in collaborative leadership. Once participants were able to see leadership as being more complex and broader than their initial definitions and understandings, they were more willing to define themselves as leaders.

The third realization for the participants was that leadership required a person to be assertive at some points in order to facilitate success. As Siobhan said, "I find that my stance is starting to shift from integrated to a more defined role ... I don't mind. It's what the group needs" (Siobhan, personal communication, May, 2014). Of note, each participant came to her own understanding of how to lead in ways that aligned with their own understanding of collaboration, skills and sense of self. For example, Jane said, "Now I can picture myself as being more of a person in charge, even if it is someone behind the scenes. I feel I can see myself as more as a head of a group." The service learning engagement allowed her to assume a leadership role, in spite of being shy, something she perceived as an impediment. In observing and interviewing all four participants, it became apparent that once participants were able to align their ideas about collaboration and leadership in a way that facilitated their group's progress, they became comfortable about seeing themselves as leaders.

Service Learning as Spaces for the Cultivation of Leadership

Throughout the engagement, participants identified personal and practical leadership skills because of leading a service learning project. They also saw these skills as potentially helping them in future leadership situations. An important part of this process for the participants was letting go of the idea that a leader needed to have all of the answers. In turn, they became excited about their future contributions to the school and community. For the participants, connecting with the community, during the early stages of the service learning project, initially seemed like an insurmountable challenge. Learning that they could create these connections with community members seemed to generate confidence amongst participants. For example, Ella referenced this skill in relation to skills she developed in the service learning workshops: "It's very much thanks to you for setting up the workshops. For showing us how to contact people." It became clear that having a safe space to explore leadership was central to their success. It was also really valuable for participants to have an adult to talk to about their experiences over time and they saw the applicability of these skills to future pursuits. For the participants, service learning went from being an extracurricular project to something that encouraged their growth as leaders.

Implications

Given that service learning has been established as being a fertile context for the development of leadership (DesMaris, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000; Sims, 2010; Pleasants, Stephens, Selph, & Pfeiffer, 2005), there are three conclusions that can be made about adolescent leadership and females that also connect to the findings of this study. Firstly, there is need and call for youth voice in the discussion about adolescent leadership (Archard, 2013; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Lizzio, Dempster, & Neumann, 2010; McNae, 2010; Whitehead, 2007). While the study sought to contribute to this gap on a small scale, ultimately much more exploration is needed to better understand the experiences of adolescents who take on leadership roles. Secondly, adolescence is an important developmental period for cultivating leadership skills, particularly in females (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008, p. 206). Finally, adults providing guidance (Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005) can help to create the space for leaders to emerge.

The third finding is not unique to this project. Lizzio, Dempster, and Neumann (2011) reviewed the literature on the influence of peer and teacher-student relationships on emerging student leadership, and found that students' sense of belonging was a far greater predictor of leadership engagement than their motivation to achieve. Moreover, Dempster and Neumann suggest that "students negotiate their civic identity and their place in the 'institutional scheme of things' from their interactions with teachers and authority figures" (p. 88). This indicates powerful potential for teachers and facilitators who not only model leadership to participants, but can also expose participants to other styles of leadership and community engagement. In their research on an afterschool program to develop leadership with adolescent females, Denner, Meyer, and Bean (2005) found that "[a]dults play a key role in creating spaces that nurture girls" (p. 89). They determined that there was great success in situations where the adults served as guides who brought experience, but not all of the answers to the project. This links with Hoyt and Kennedy's (2008) argument that adolescent females may benefit most from role models who validate feminine leadership styles. It can be suggested that creating situations where adolescents, specifically females, feel part of a group and are led by facilitators who expose them to multiple leadership styles, may be an important step in cultivating young female leaders. The findings of this study reiterate and reinforce these conclusions.

Conclusion

The conclusions of this work suggest that that adolescent leadership is a realm different than adult leadership and that service learning is a fertile ground for encouraging leadership among adolescents. The four females who took part in this study illustrate that being an adolescent female leader warrants special attention. Moreover, adults who engage with adolescents in conversations about leadership play a significant role in fostering and encouraging leadership among adolescent females.

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